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## "Listen to the Wild Discord": Jazz in the Chicago Defender and the Louisiana Weekly, 1925-1929

Sarah A. Waits

*swaits*, [swaits@uno.edu](mailto:swaits@uno.edu)

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“Listen to the Wild Discord”: Jazz in the *Chicago Defender* and the *Louisiana Weekly*, 1925-1929

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
History

by

Sarah Waits

B.A. Louisiana State University, 2006

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## **Abstract**

This essay will use the views of two African American newspaper columnists, E. Belfield Spriggins of the *Louisiana Weekly* and Dave Peyton of the *Chicago Defender*, to argue that though New Orleans and Chicago both occupied a primary place in the history of jazz, in many ways jazz was initially met with ambivalence and suspicion. The struggle between the desire to highlight black achievement in music and the effort to adhere to tenets of middle class respectability play out in their columns. Despite historiographical writings to the contrary, these issues of the influence of jazz music on society were not limited to the white community. Tracing these columnists through the years of 1925-1929, a critical point in the popularity of jazz, reveals how considerations of black innovation and economic autonomy helped alter their opinions from criticism to ownership.

Keywords: Jazz; New Orleans; African Americans; Louisiana Weekly; Chicago Defender; History

**Here tattooed women dance wildly,  
Their sensuous bodies steeped in sin,  
And much-displayed limbs are exhibited  
To glassy-eyed men soaked in gin.**

**Where is this Africa they speak of?  
I sense it about me here.  
In a people with wild abandon,  
Dancing pagan music, “sans” care.<sup>1</sup>**

Popular history claims the decade of the 1920s as the Jazz Age. With the exciting and foot-tapping music came new-fangled and daring changes in culture, lifestyle, and fashion, including shortened skirts and bobbed hair for women, who began to frequent bars, cabarets, and night clubs in greater numbers. Surviving film footage from the era shows liquor flowing freely, trumpeters swinging, and stylish couples cakewalking, all the to the music of black Americans.

This paper will investigate the role played by African American newspapers, specifically the *Louisiana Weekly* and the *Chicago Defender*, in shaping, influencing, and reflecting the reception of jazz in the cultural society of African Americans in Chicago and New Orleans in the years 1925-1929. A comparison of two social columns, E. Belfield Spriggins’ “Folly Column” in the *Louisiana Weekly* (focusing on the period from 1926-1929) and Dave Peyton’s “The Musical Bunch,” published in the *Chicago Defender* (focusing on the period from 1925-1929), sheds light on the social prevalence, relevancy, and acceptance of jazz by African Americans in both communities in the latter half of the 1920s. For audiences of the period in both Chicago and New Orleans, music consumed a large portion of their time (listening to music at home, at church, or in nightclubs) and income (purchasing sheet music, records, radio equipment, tickets to travelling acts, and entrance fees to cabarets). This paper will argue that although New Orleans and Chicago occupied a primary place in the history of jazz, the views of Spriggins and Peyton show that in many ways jazz was initially met with ambivalence and suspicion in both

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from a poem by Edw. Dejoie Burbridge, “Pagan Music,” *Louisiana Weekly*, March 3, 1928. See full poem in the Appendix, page 48.

communities. The struggle between the desire to highlight black achievement in music and the effort to adhere to tenets of middle class respectability play out in the writings of these two men. Despite historiographical writings to the contrary, these issues of the influence of jazz music on society were not limited to the white community.

A clarification should be made regarding the definition of jazz and the “Jazz Age.” This paper will not explore the theoretical definition of jazz; not the innovative changes in tempo nor the role of the soloist that propelled the music towards new directions, nor even how the music differed in Chicago and New Orleans, but rather how jazz as a cultural, economic, and historical movement changed and affected lives of musicians and regular citizens in these two cities during the “Jazz Age.” As author William Kenney notes, “a distinction can be made between ‘jazz,’ as innovation in musical art, and the phrase ‘jazz age,’ that can be used to describe ‘Roaring Twenties’ social dance music and associated activities, such as going out to dance halls and cabarets, going to the movies, dressing like... ‘flappers,’ and drinking bootleg gin.”<sup>2</sup> Through the perspectives of Dave Peyton and E. Belfield Spriggins on the subject of jazz, and the jazz lifestyle, this paper will also demonstrate that during the 1920s there was not a homogeneous African American community in the United States. Education, class, market forces, and the contrasting influences of the Harlem Renaissance and vernacular culture all factor into these two columnists’ points of view.

In addition, this paper will show the integral role that newspapers played in the African American community and their effectiveness as a source for historians. An overview of the contested and misrepresented history of jazz in New Orleans and jazz’s diffusion throughout the United States and into the neighborhoods of Chicago will provide background to describe the quotidian environments in which Peyton, Spriggins, and their readerships lived. The exchange of people, ideas, and music from

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<sup>2</sup> William Kenney, *Chicago Jazz: A Cultural History, 1904-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), xiii.

New Orleans to Chicago is a rich and storied one. For many African Americans in the South, pursuing economic opportunities in the North was the only way to escape the confines and pressures of the Jim Crow South. However, Spriggins' columns show that from his perspective, New Orleans could compete with Chicago in its opportunities, and indeed, visiting Chicago as tourists could be more beneficial for the black middle class in New Orleans than emigrating there. Both Spriggins and Peyton sanctioned the keystones of the Harlem Renaissance and strove to share with their reading public their opinions of uplift, respectability, and positive black cultural achievement.

Regarding the cultural and social role that jazz played in their respective communities, Spriggins and Peyton understood the market forces that influenced musicians to play jazz, club owners to provide jazz, and the listening public to frequent jazz clubs. They also appreciated the function of radio and recordings in the dissemination of jazz, the blues, and spirituals and how these new media afforded African Americans a way of educating and informing both black and white audiences of the cultural capital of African Americans. The columns of Spriggins and Peyton reflect the initial conflict involved in embracing the popular vernacular along with the "respectable" Western music of the late 1920s. Tracing their columns through the crucial years of 1925-1929 also reveals how considerations of black ownership and economic autonomy helped their opinions towards jazz to shift and alter. Just as the 1920s was a decade of upheaval and constant change, so too were the communities of New Orleans and Chicago changing. The time period, the culture, the music—none of these elements were static, and neither were the opinions and sentiments of Dave Peyton and E. Belfield Spriggins.

### **Historiography**

Newspapers, amongst other uses, aid readers by circulating information, influencing beliefs, promoting a political agenda, advertising products and events, and introducing the reading public to people, places, and issues that the publishing staffs consider important enough to share. For historians and researchers, newspapers can provide a glimpse into the communities of our forebears. But

newspapers are not always accepted by critics as a legitimate primary source. Sociologist Roberto Franzosi declared that “the problem with using the press as a source of event data is that the validity of newspaper information is questionable. It has been argued that newspapers differ widely in their reporting practices and news coverage and that, in any case, news is biased and selective.”<sup>3</sup> Along with movies, commercials, advertisements, and other forms of cultural expression, some scholars believe that the views expressed are not those of the audience, but those of the creators. Lawrence Levine argues against this attitude: “Whether it is fair or not, we are being asked to justify the use of popular culture as a historical source, to explain why these materials reflect anything more than what those who produced them were thinking.”<sup>4</sup>

While certainly the two newspapers presented here had specific goals in mind when publishing content, it could be argued that those goals and views were not produced in a vacuum. *Louisiana Weekly* columnist E. Belfield Spriggins and *Chicago Defender* writer Dave Peyton wrote about topics that interested them, topics that were in the forefront of the minds of their readerships as well. And that topic was music, and more specifically, African American music, represented by jazz, the blues, spirituals, and classical and popular music.

While it could be argued that the columns of Spriggins and Peyton reflected their personal opinions, they are also useful in shedding light on a specific time period (late 1920s), location (New Orleans and Chicago), and viewpoint (professional African American men) and are particularly useful given the relative paucity of outlets for the African American voice in this period in American history.

Paramount to the discussion of the African American newspaper is the knowledge that without these newspapers, news concerning African Americans would probably have not been published at all.

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<sup>3</sup> Roberto Franzosi, “The Press as a Source of Socio-Historical Data: Issues in the Methodology of Data Collection from Newspapers,” *Historical Methods* 20, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 6.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Levine, “The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences,” *The American Historical Review* 97 (1992): 1370.



Writers for the *Louisiana Weekly* were aware of this situation, and in 1929 the paper re-published an article from a Philadelphia newspaper discussing the problem:

It is generally understood that the Associated Press (white) in its gathering of news, does not, in any great degree, cover the Negro's sphere of activities. In fact, no special effort is made to get this sort of information, and give it out the world in a general way. So far as the Negro is concerned, or as his achievements, activities, etc., no, the surface has not yet been scratched, and prominent men in the field of journalism are now in the eastern section of the country making way for the coming of this great service.<sup>5</sup>

Drawing directly from African American newspapers, and thus the black community itself, can help to avoid the pitfalls inherent in jazz historiography. Although the history of the early roots of jazz in New Orleans and the musicians involved therein has provided material for hundreds of books and articles from historians and jazz fans, much of the early work on jazz is often rife with myths and legends characterizing New Orleans as a humid, steamy, lascivious, sinful backwater where musical creativity emerged from the primordial muck in complete form.<sup>6</sup> As described by historian Connie Atkinson, "musical activities have been marginalized, talent and expertise have been subverted and cultural activities have been exoticized in a way that denies intelligence and agency."<sup>7</sup>

Certainly New Orleans has a long and musical history. According to historian Curtis Jerde, "long before the more prominent metropolitan centers of today (e.g., New York, Chicago, Los Angeles) could claim the distinction, New Orleans qualified as the nation's music capital."<sup>8</sup> And the roots of this musical tradition started in the African American community. Even before the organized Sunday dances at

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<sup>5</sup> "A Forward Move in Negro Journalism," *Louisiana Weekly*, August 24, 1929.

<sup>6</sup> See R. Collins, *New Orleans Jazz: A Revised History* (New York: Vantage Press, 1996) for a concise dismissal of these myths.

<sup>7</sup> Connie Zeanah Atkinson, "Armstrong and the Image of New Orleans," in *Satchmo Meets Amadeus* vol. 2, ed. Reinhold Wagnleitner (Innsbruck: Studien Verlag, 2007), 132.

<sup>8</sup> Curtis D. Jerde, "Black Music in New Orleans: A Historical Overview," *Black Music Research Journal* 10 (1990):18.

Congo Square, enslaved Africans and free people of color came together to socialize and dance, with evidence showing these events starting as early as 1786.<sup>9</sup> Social and cultural histories have been written about the music; the race, gender, and class of the musicians; the dispersion of the music throughout the country and the world by means of migrating and touring performers; and the spread of new technology like records, radio, and after 1927, through films with sound.<sup>10</sup> With the Great Migration of the 1910s and 1920s, thousands of African Americans left the Deep South and took their musical traditions with them to Northern and Western cities.

However, little has been written about the differing experiences of African American musicians in New Orleans as compared to musicians in the rest of the South. Many early and contemporary histories of jazz continue to claim that many jazz musicians were unable to read music, and the music was felt, or inherent, or related to some innate African American self-expression. As R. Collins portrayed it, “especially vexatious is the theory that instinct, not human intelligence, brought about the development of music and a culture of high degree.”<sup>11</sup> For many, the development of jazz in New Orleans by skilled musicians was ignored and overlooked. Even Alain Locke, influential founder of the Harlem Renaissance, discredited all jazz outside of New York: “in New York between 1905 and 1912 or 1915, four Negro conductors and arrangers of genius organized Negro music out of a broken, musically-illiterate dialect and made it a national and international music with its own peculiar idioms of harmony, instrumentation and technical style of playing. (...) Their names? Ford Dabney, James Reese Europe, Will Marion Cook and W. C. Handy.”<sup>12</sup> The musical illiteracy that Locke claimed may have been true of some musicians, but was not the case with the majority of musicians in New Orleans. Though the goal of the

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<sup>9</sup> Jerde, “Black Music,” 19.

<sup>10</sup> (See Gushee, Rayburn, Jerde, Collins, Kenney, et. al.)

<sup>11</sup> R. Collins, *New Orleans Jazz: A Revised History* (New York: Vantage Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969), 65-66.

Harlem Renaissance was to uplift the race and feature its accomplishments, Locke's view reinforces the argument that African Americans were not a uniform body, and also shows the underlying class tensions between the urban African Americans mentioned by Locke and his insinuation of the "musically-illiterate" "dialect" of the poor, rural black community.

Because of New Orleans' colonial history as a French and then Spanish colony (particularly with the manumission policies during the Spanish period that created a large population of free people of color), and the differing cultural rules and regulations that set it apart from the rest of the South—and arguably from the rest of the United States—the experiences of black New Orleanians, starting from their arrival in the eighteenth century until the advent of the Jazz Age in the 1920s, show a very different story from their counterparts in Alabama, Virginia, New York or Illinois. Many black New Orleanians could own property, engage in business, and succeed in ways that enslaved peoples in the rest of the United States could not. Some historians have argued that the Creole population in New Orleans separated itself from the rest of the city and this seclusion provided the unique circumstances that underlie the founding of jazz music. According to Collins, by the early- to mid-nineteenth century, under American rule, "the colored Creoles retreated into the isolation of their own society and proceeded to further their own culture independently from the rest of the New Orleans, the South, and the United States in general."<sup>13</sup> However, Jerah Johnson disagrees with Collins. According to Johnson, "jazz had its origins not in segregation, but in the assimilative tradition of easy interaction of peoples that prevailed in New Orleans. Jazz is a music of urban civilization and complexity, not a music of cultural isolation or of racial singularity."<sup>14</sup> This interaction and mingling allowed black New Orleanians to pursue a particular

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<sup>13</sup> R. Collins, *New Orleans Jazz*, 52.

<sup>14</sup> Jerah Johnson, "Jim Crow Laws of the 1890s and the Origins of New Orleans Jazz: Correction of an Error," *Popular Music* 19, no. 2 (April 2000): 249.

cosmopolitan and cultured existence unlike that experienced by African Americans in the rest of the United States.

The contrasting interests of two African American newspapers, the *Chicago Defender* and the *Louisiana Weekly* argue against the African American community as a monolithic entity, and an examination of each points out how the experiences and values of African Americans in Chicago differed from those of black New Orleanians. In his study of mid-twentieth century Chicago, Adam Green claimed that ideas of a unified Black America did not emerge until the mid-1950s, though as Green points out, “over time, accounts of nationalist spirit among African Americans have become so common as to make it seem an obvious and natural feature of black worldview.”<sup>15</sup>

The place of New Orleans and Chicago in jazz history has long been acknowledged by jazz scholars. For instance, Chicagoan Richard Wang wrote “the history of early jazz is the record of an art form nurtured in the crucible of New Orleans, exported to Chicago, where it was forever changed, and transmitted from there to the world.”<sup>16</sup> As Leroy Ostransky noted in his study of Chicago’s role in the transference of American culture, “because of Chicago’s location as a water and rail transportation center, its wide-open atmosphere, and the consequent gathering of transients with money to spend and a short time in which to spend it, Chicago attracted musicians from all around the country as early as the Chicago’s World Fair of 1893.”<sup>17</sup> Concerning the relation of New Orleans to Chicago, Court Carney wrote “much as myth defined the origins of jazz music in New Orleans—with narratives sensationalizing Storyville and Place Congo—early chroniclers of jazz routinely hyped the diffusion of the music to

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<sup>15</sup> Adam Green, *Selling the Race* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), 44.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Wang, “Researching the New Orleans-Chicago Jazz Connection: Tools and Methods,” *Black Music Research Journal* 8 (1988): 111.

<sup>17</sup> Leroy Ostransky, “Early Jazz,” *Music Educators Journal* 64 (1978): 35.

Chicago with the shadowed romanticism of riverboats and railroads.”<sup>18</sup> Though the connection of the two cities has certainly been mythologized, the transferal of New Orleans music and musicians to Chicago cannot be discounted.

As the flow of immigrants halted during World War I and many Americans left to fight overseas, positions in industry in the industrial north opened up. According to historian James Grossman, “the increasing demand for black laborers in the North not only obliterated the old argument that black economic opportunity lay exclusively in the South but offered the black race the chance to prove its ability to perform industrial labor.”<sup>19</sup> Stated Ostransky, “interest in Chicago reached the peak of intensity in 1917 when southern blacks were wooed north with promises that jobs in defense industries were plentiful, that Chicago money flowed freely and was easier to come by than southern money, and that the sort of success being enjoyed by those jazzmen already on the scene was now available to all.”<sup>20</sup> After securing jobs for themselves and a place in the community, newly-transplanted African Americans in Chicago had, perhaps for the first time, the expendable income to frequent and support music venues. The South Side of Chicago in particular attracted many musicians to cabarets and nightclubs that offered nightly jazz shows. This area of the city became a mecca for musicians and fans alike to witness firsthand the lifestyle changes that defined the Jazz Age.

Embracing the music and the lifestyle of the Jazz Age presented a challenge for African Americans. On the one hand, extra income and the enjoyment of the jazz lifestyle beckoned from the South Side, while on the other, preachers and newspaper columnists ranted about the sins inherent in jazz music. The push and pull between vernacular culture and high art, as contemplated during the

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<sup>18</sup> Court Carney, *Cuttin’ Up: How Early Jazz Got America’s Ear* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 59.

<sup>19</sup> James R. Grossman, “Blowing the Trumpet: The ‘Chicago Defender’ and Black Migration during World War I,” *Illinois Historical Journal* 78 (1985):92.

<sup>20</sup> Ostransky, “Early Jazz,” 35-36.

Harlem Renaissance and later, reflects the longstanding issues within the history of jazz and the study of African American music. According to McClary and Walser, “The first step away from this trap of polarities is to recognize that black music is not the universal unconscious or the primitive body... but rather a highly disciplined set of practices.”<sup>21</sup>

For the principal members of the Harlem Renaissance, in an idealized and equal world, the “New Negro” would patronize bastions of culture like the concert hall and the art museum, showing his white counterparts his comparable education and nuanced understanding of high art. Samuel Floyd Jr. states that this fictive everyman “would not frequent musical dens of iniquity, for he would then tarnish the image that was to be presented to the world as evidence of his preparedness,”<sup>22</sup> and jazz was not considered a “preparatory” education. Floyd averred that “the necessity of Renaissance leaders to extol some aspects of black culture while denying and suppressing others was natural, since the idea was to integrate with white society by selling black people and black culture to the larger society as worthy and equal. The fact was, however, that the ‘primitive’ and ‘degenerate’ secular music of the period manifested the aesthetic of the movement better than any other resource available.”<sup>23</sup>

For many African Americans, the ideals of uplift and equality included the belief that one must adhere to the standards of the middle class, which eschewed the popularity of jazz. Since jazz was rooted in African American culture and not European culture, it was considered “black” music, and therefore inferior to white/European music. According to Alwyn Williams, “because blues and jazz were associated with lewd conduct and a shady milieu by much of middle-class America, it was necessary for

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<sup>21</sup> Susan McClary and Robert Walser, “Theorizing the Body in African-American Music,” *Black Music Research Journal* 14, no. 1 (1994): 76.

<sup>22</sup> Samuel A. Floyd Jr., “Music in the Harlem Renaissance: An Overview,” in *Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Samuel A. Floyd Jr. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Floyd, “Music in the Harlem Renaissance,” 5.

black Americans to disown those musical forms—association with them would only perpetuate the idea prevalent among whites that blacks were lascivious and primitive.”<sup>24</sup>

Influential members of the Harlem Renaissance linked the artistic virtuosity of European concert music with racial “uplift” within the black community. If African Americans learned the same songs and music venerated by white American and European audiences, and could perform this music with grace, composure, and technical perfection, then the thinking went, they might be accepted as equals by whites. To many African Americans, “uplift” went beyond acceptance from the white community; uplift also included a strengthening of the ties within the African American community and the importance of education and culture within the race. In his study of uplift, cultural historian Kevin Gaines defined the term as “among its other connotations, (it) also represented the struggle for a positive black identity in a deeply racist society, turning the pejorative designation of race into a source of dignity and self-affirmation through an ideology of class differentiation, self-help, and interdependence.”<sup>25</sup> Uplift, then, could be seen as a struggle by African Americans within America as a whole, and also a struggle between classes within the black community.

One manifestation of uplift was through middle-class values of family, religion, progress, and education. Regarding the combined influence of music and education, historian David Suisman suggested that “music education (acted) as a means of personal edification and a way of breaking down social barriers.”<sup>26</sup> In 1927 the *Louisiana Weekly* published an article mirroring that same idea: “The love for music is universal. Music is fascinating [sic] even to Pagans. We need more music in our homes, not

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<sup>24</sup> Alwyn Williams, “Jazz and the New Negro: Harlem’s Intellectuals Wrestle With the Art of the Age,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 21 (2002): 1.

<sup>25</sup> Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>26</sup> David Suisman, “Co-Workers in the Kingdom of Culture: Black Swan Records and the Political Economy of African American Music,” *The Journal of American History* 90 (2004): 1303.

jazz and nonsense, not music of the kind that violates good taste and roughens the feelings; but music sacred and divine, pure and cultured, pleasing to people of education and refinement.”<sup>27</sup>

The music industry itself also played a large role in what types of music were available for purchase and consumption by black as well as white audiences. By the late 1910s, few recordings by African Americans existed, and artists were often limited to vernacular caricatures and racist stereotypes. In his account of Black Swan Records, a black-owned and operated recording studio which strove to provide positive and uplifting music to the black community by black artists, historian David Suisman noted that though some recordings existed, usually of religious singers or band leaders like James Reese Europe, “those exceptions did nothing to alter the industry’s low valuation of African American talent, its reluctance to depict African Americans as performers of so-called quality music, or its general pattern of marginalizing or excluding African American musicians.”<sup>28</sup>

With the increased popularity and access to radio in the late 1920s came exposure of African American musicians and performers to a wide and diverse audience. Demand skyrocketed for recordings of songs heard on the radio. African Americans’ purchasing power allowed them to help influence who was played on the radio and whose records were bought. Because of the flow of rural Southern blacks into the North during the 1910s and 1920s, blues artists who may have had a limited appeal in the South were now popular throughout the country, because of the dispersal of rural blacks into the urban centers of the North. As historian Adam Green described it, “the sheer reach of radio and record technologies promised greater public access to popular music... The emergent race record trade promised increased cultural authority for African Americans, in particular popular capacity to demand material truer to vernacular taste, and thus communal experience.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Louisiana Weekly*, August 6, 1927.

<sup>28</sup> Suisman, “Co-Workers in the Kingdom,” 1296.

<sup>29</sup> Green, *Selling the Race*, 54-55.



In 1929 an article in the *Louisiana Weekly*, sourced by the Associated Negro Press, applauded the radio for its role in providing a new audience for black music. "One of the greatest assets to the Negro in the United States is radio broadcasting. Nothing has done quite so much to shed new light on the colored citizen as has the unseen power that carries sound to all parts of the world. Here is the door by which the world will known [sic] more about the accomplishments and achievements of this remarkable race. By virtue of the wonderful progress colored America has made on the air, new opportunities are opening to them daily."<sup>30</sup> This author understood the economic power the radio had for both providers and consumers of the new technology. The radio exposed black music and traditions not only to other African Americans, but to a wider white audience as well.

The struggle between embracing and rejecting black vernacular music played out on the pages of the *Weekly* and the *Defender*. Although the view of jazz and blues as not appropriate for the middle classes often prevailed in discussions of the music in the *Weekly* and the *Defender*, the African American spiritual was often praised and lauded as a true representation of what black culture had to offer to America. According to scholar Alwyn Williams, who studied the importance of music in the Harlem Renaissance, "Racial vindication would be obtained through disciplined study of concert music, and the transformation of the Spiritual from a basic folk form to that of a key ingredient in concert hall composition. Jazz, the blues, and other forms of black secular music had little to offer the advancement of African Americans."<sup>31</sup> Both Peyton and Spriggins prescribed to this belief of "racial vindication" through "disciplined study," and it is apparent in their columns, both by which types of music and musicians they highlighted, and by which types they disparaged or left out altogether.

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<sup>30</sup> Alvin E. White, "The Radio and the Negro," *Louisiana Weekly*, March 30, 1929.

<sup>31</sup> Williams, "Jazz and the New Negro," 3.

Though not credited to Spriggins, an article in the *Weekly* from 1926 showed this pro-vernacular viewpoint:

Far away in the land of England, a British Earl listened to the songs of a suffering people, transmitted through one who was not of that people. Songs of hope he heard and songs of longing; songs of fear and songs of yearning, and we wonder what brain reactions were set up in his mind and what caused him to desire to come to the source and hear these songs in their original setting.

Negro music is now stirring the world. Negro music is causing learned men to give time to research and study. As they study our music they must study our foreparents. As they study our foreparents they must study the conditions under which they lived and which gave birth to this wonderful music.

Sometimes we hate these songs. Too often they bring to us visions of physical torture [sic]. Too often they carry with them the odor of burning flesh. .. and yet who knows but that these same songs may in the course of time be instrumental in bringing us to the happiness which our fathers sought.

Let us, therefore, keep them alive. Let us sing them. Let us teach our children to sing them.<sup>32</sup>

Here, the author claimed that African American music, specifically the spiritual, was worthy of listening by a British Earl. Not only an Englishman, an icon of high culture, but a man of the nobility. The author conjectured that “negro music” was legitimated not by the story it told of the struggle of the African American, but rather because of the race, class, and location (white, nobleman, British) of the audience. There is an obvious struggle taking place on the pages of the *Weekly* and of the *Defender*: the desire to share and highlight the positive cultural achievements of African Americans, while at the same time following and embracing the criterions of middle-class American culture and ideals at large. Indeed, this struggle is mirrored by their Harlem Renaissance contemporaries: as Samuel Floyd Jr. observed, “for W. E. B. Du Bois, the prime exponent of the Talented-tenth concept, is credited with the ‘rediscovery of the spirituals” and Alain Locke, a colleague of Du Bois’, stated that spirituals ““stand out... as one of the

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<sup>32</sup> “Negro Music,” *Louisiana Weekly*, May 29, 1926.

great classic expressions of all times,” though Locke also thought that “negro composers have been too much influenced by formal European idioms in setting them.”<sup>33</sup>

Not all African Americans thought that spirituals epitomized the black experience. Author Chadwick Hansen, who in the 1960s wrote about the social influences on jazz in Chicago in the 1920s, agreed with Locke, commenting that black concert musicians, when singing spirituals, were singing concert-arranged versions of the songs, very different from the spirituals actually sung in the fields and churches of the South. According to Hansen:

A Negro concert singer is expected to include a number of spirituals in his repertory. This is foolish, since the Negro uses the same concert arrangements of spiritual melodies as the white concert singer, and these arrangements are a far cry from the spirituals as they are sung by a shouting congregation. But the concert audience likes to get its spirituals from a Negro. The music carries a racial tag, and the Negro singer is expected to accept it.<sup>34</sup>

Likewise, in 1922 A. E. Perkins, a public school principal in New Orleans and the author of many books and articles was of the opinion that spirituals:

Must go, in fact. Many, many years will pass by, of course, before they will be forgotten and have fallen into complete disuse by the rural church, and in the church of the masses in the cities even; nevertheless they are passing away. They are almost entirely discarded to-day by the élite church of the race. They have no striking meaning for the spirit and life of the forward and intelligent groups of Negroes to-day.<sup>35</sup>

The dissenting judgments of Perkins, Locke, and Hansen that spirituals were not the ultimate expression of the black American experience strengthens the claim that the African American experience was not constant and homogenous.

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<sup>33</sup> Floyd, “Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance,” 13-14.

<sup>34</sup> Chadwick Hansen, “Social Influences on Jazz Style: Chicago, 1920-30,” *American Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (1960): 501.

<sup>35</sup> A. E. Perkins, “Negro Spirituals from the Far South,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 35, no. 137 (Jul. – Sep. 1922): 224.

## History of the *Chicago Defender*

In 1905, the *Chicago Defender*, a newspaper created for African Americans by an African American, Robert Sengstacke Abbott, began circulation.<sup>36</sup> The *Chicago Defender* held a politically radical viewpoint and boasted a nationwide readership. From 1905 until 1963 it ran as a weekly. From 1963 until 2003 it ran as a daily publication. In 2003 it once again reverted to a weekly. The *Defender* played an important role in keeping Southern blacks aware of the economic and social opportunities in northern cities, especially in Chicago. Kenney described his motivations as touristic: “to attract black tourists, Robert S. Abbott’s *Chicago Defender* issued both a city and a national edition, the latter intended for broad circulation to readers throughout the Midwest and South.”<sup>37</sup>

However, *The Defender* was not merely a brochure for possible tourists. Abbott had a specific purpose and goal: to contrast the violence, degradation and racism of the Jim Crow South with what he framed as the idyllic, integrated and opportunistic Chicago. His paper was militant and sensationalist, demanding retribution for the lynchings, murders, and daily injustices faced by the black population of the South. James Grossman discussed the role of the *Defender* in the Great Migration, claiming that “in reporting news of white violence against blacks in the South, *Defender* correspondents spared few of the gory details, and the editors reputedly embellished them even further.”<sup>38</sup> Many African American newspapers in the South were unable to publish news about lynchings and other violent acts because of intimidation by local white authorities, and crimes against African Americans were seldom reported by the white dailies. The *Defender* filled this void, giving Southern blacks news to which they otherwise

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<sup>36</sup> Lawrence Schenbeck, “Music, Gender, and ‘Uplift’ in the ‘Chicago Defender,’ 1927-1937,” *The Musical Quarterly* 81 (1997): 344-345.

<sup>37</sup> Kenney, *Chicago Jazz*, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Grossman, “Blowing the Trumpet,” 85.

would have no access. By the 1920s, nationwide circulation of the paper is estimated to be in the range of 180,000 and 280,000.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to selling the *Defender* in Southern cities, Abbott also enlisted Pullman porters to sell and distribute the paper on their weekly routes throughout the small towns and hamlets of the South. And for every paper that was sold, multiple people would read it for it would be passed around within the community, shared within households and even read aloud.<sup>40</sup>

The *Defender* not only exhorted Southerners to leave the South; it also provided advertisements for jobs available in the North and even told the success stories of newly-transplanted Southerners. As the flow of immigrants halted during World War I and many Americans left to fight overseas, positions in industry opened up. Certainly Chicago benefitted from the new increase in population, both economically and politically, as did the power and influence the *Defender* wielded over its readership. The *Defender* advertised more than just economic opportunities. Chicago promised a cultural and social life for African Americans: state-of-the-art movie palaces, numerous night clubs, fine dining establishments, and leisure activities for all to enjoy, as fine, or even finer, than any of the white establishments in their own hometowns where they may have only dreamt of visiting.

The *Chicago Defender* also played a role in the dispersion of New Orleans-born jazz musicians into the North and West of the country. By highlighting the gigs and engagements of New Orleans-born musicians, and of orchestras that played New Orleans-style jazz, musicians in New Orleans were aware of the economic and popular successes of former residents. And many musicians from New Orleans who

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<sup>39</sup> Grossman, "Blowing the Trumpet," 88.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

moved to Chicago invited and encouraged musicians still in New Orleans to relocate to the busy scene in Chicago.<sup>41</sup>

### **History of the *Louisiana Weekly***

While not outright conservative, the *Weekly* did not, for example, encourage readers to perpetrate violence against white lynch mobs (as did the *Defender* on multiple occasions). The *Louisiana Weekly* understood its role in the black community in New Orleans, and how it was perceived. The following statement published in 1929 by the *Louisiana Weekly* at the commemoration of their fourth birthday sheds light upon the distinct vision, responsibility, and function the *Weekly* hoped to carry out in New Orleans:

This week, four years ago, we launched our initial attempt at journalism. Today, after these four years of effort we are wondering if the efforts put forth have been fruitful, worthwhile and of sufficient value to make us feel that we have delivered to the people full value received.

In taking stock we find that we have increased our circulation from nothing to over nine thousand cash subscribers. We are covering the southern portion of the state as the proverbial dew covers the ground. We find that our quarters, becoming too small for us to give service to our readers, necessitated us to move.

In taking stock in this department, we find that we have been able to carry the news from our many rural correspondents in Louisiana and adjoining states. We find that we have been able to carry good news about our people which never would have been carried in papers of the other group, and we have thus been able to show up the better side of the Negro.

We find that we have grown in influence and power, neither of which we have attempted to abuse. We have grown and are still growing. We have championed the cause of American, black and white, we have given live and healthful news, but above all else, we are proud of the fact that we have packed square with the people.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> "...Up came Johnny and Baby Dodds, Jimmy Noone, Honore Dutrey, and then Joe (King) Oliver. In 1923 Oliver asked Louis Armstrong to come up from New Orleans, and later, when Armstrong needed help, he sent for drummer Zutty Singleton. And the names run on and on." Ostransky, "Early Jazz," 36.

<sup>42</sup> Editorial, *Louisiana Weekly*, October 12, 1929.

This excerpt indicates the central objective of the editorial staff of the *Weekly*: to show African Americans in a positive light, and to give publicity, information, and hope to a marginalized population usually ignored by the white dailies.

The *Louisiana Weekly* highlighted the frequent exchange of residents, visitors, and goods between New Orleans and Chicago. In fact, the *Louisiana Weekly* introduced a column in 1927 to alert New Orleans residents to the social clubs, parties, and events hosted by New Orleans natives residing in Chicago.<sup>43</sup> The *Weekly* of August 24, 1929, provided advertisements for companies in Chicago and noted that “The merchants appearing on this page are preparing to see you and meet you face to face. Some of them are from New Orleans, or other parts of Louisiana. Our sister newspapers, the ‘Chicago Defender’ and the ‘Chicago Whip’ have also extended their special invitation to our party. We hope you will visit their offices and plants and register your names while in Chicago.”<sup>44</sup>

Just as the *Chicago Defender* employed a columnist, Dave Peyton, to provide information about the cultural and musical scene of Chicago to its readers, on January 16, 1926, the *Louisiana Weekly* began to publish a new column, the “Folly Column,” written by E. Belfield Spriggins, to discuss the high society goings-on in New Orleans: “It is our aim to embrace within this column the best that Colored New Orleans has to offer in the way of worthwhile entertainment.”

#### **Dave Peyton, Author of “The Musical Bunch” in the *Chicago Defender***

At age 40, Dave Peyton, pianist and performer with many Chicago jazz bands, began writing his column, “The Musical Bunch” for the *Chicago Defender*. Peyton’s column premiered in the November 21, 1925, edition of the *Chicago Defender*. In contrast to Spriggins, who rarely mentioned individual musicians by name, Dave Peyton mentioned jazz bands specifically by name in his first column and

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<sup>43</sup> For example, on June 25, 1927, Pollyanna, the author of the “What Louisianians are Doing in Chicago” column in the *Louisiana Weekly*, highlighted the recent parties given by the Straight University Club and the Xavier University Club.

<sup>44</sup> *Louisiana Weekly*, August 24, 1929.

continued to highlight local and national attractions until the discontinuation of the column in 1929. The fact that Spriggins did not mention musicians and Peyton did may reflect the differing audiences of the two columnists and their papers. Whereas Spriggins was writing for an audience of more conservative music consumers, telling them about upcoming events and writing reviews of past ones, Peyton was writing not only for consumers of music but also for community and music business of Chicago. As music historian Lawrence Schenbeck described it, “entertainment news was written as much, or more, for the struggling music professional as for the music consumer. For example, ‘The Musical Bunch,’ by Dave Peyton, which ran from 1925-1929, was clearly aimed at working dance-band and café musicians. Jobs were to be had in the hotels, saloons, theatres, and restaurants of Chicago, and Peyton could help ambitious musicians get them. The prospect of dance-band work was particularly attractive to working-class black men, who might otherwise have had to push a broom somewhere at a much lower wage, given the economic constraints imposed by racism.”<sup>45</sup>

Throughout the four years of its existence Peyton repeatedly encouraged his readers, whom he referred to as “the Musical Bunch,” to practice their instruments, attend engagements, arrive punctually for gigs, perform well, and above all to behave in a professional manner. He was often derisive towards jazz, at least in the early years of his column, lamenting the fact that classically-trained musicians were playing jazz in order to put food on the table for their families. However, he understood that some work was better than no work at all. As Kenney notes, “the outspoken advocacy of European concert music found in Peyton’s weekly column marked the farthest extreme in the assimilationist interpretation of South Side music.”<sup>46</sup> Though jazz music provided the bread and butter for many African American musicians, Peyton seemed to assume that jazz was a passing phase and all musicians would have the opportunity to return to classical music once jazz was no longer popular with the public. As historian

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<sup>45</sup> Schenbeck, “Music, Gender, and ‘Uplift,’” 348.

<sup>46</sup> Kenney, *Chicago Jazz*, 56.



Court Carney described Peyton's view of jazz, he was "aware of its power but fearful of its consequences... His columns relate to the larger, more virulent protests by critics who struggled to proscribe all forms of jazz."<sup>47</sup> But as time progressed, the population of black Chicago increased, and jazz became even more prevalent in the daily lives of his readership, perhaps it was no longer economically savvy for Peyton to disparage the music and business of his audience, and his tone shifted.

### **E. Belfield Spriggins, Author of the "Folly Column" in the *Louisiana Weekly***

Born in 1892 to a midwife and plasterer, E. Belfield Spriggins grew up in New Orleans.<sup>48</sup> He graduated from Straight University and in 1918 began teaching at McDonogh 35, the first public high school for African Americans, which was founded in 1917. There he taught art in addition to his journalistic pursuits as the society columnist at the *Louisiana Weekly*. In fact, the offices of the *Louisiana Weekly* were located a few blocks away from McDonogh 35. Spriggins was personally involved in the black concert music scene, taking it upon himself to advertise, fund, and even house travelling musicians visiting the New Orleans area. According to an article written about Spriggins in 1925, his "hobby" was hosting and supporting local, regional, and even international talent:

There is a treat coming to the music-loving people of New Orleans when Miss Maude Armstrong is presented in piano recital by our own Mr. E Belfield Spriggins, whose very delightful hobby is the display of talent wherever found in our race. It is known that Mr. Spriggins is a tireless worker whenever it comes to racial enterprise; friends as well as enemies do not deny him that virtue... Mr. Spriggins knows it is seldom that local talent is given the opportunity that means for it so much encouragement.<sup>49</sup>

Because of his involvement in the African American musical scene in New Orleans, and his position of relative power at the *Louisiana Weekly* (including the power to advertise, mention, and give

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<sup>47</sup> Carney, *Cuttin' Up*, 67-68.

<sup>48</sup> Lynn Abbott, "Remembering... Mr. E. Belfield Spriggins: 'First Man of Jazzology'," *78 Quarterly* (New Orleans: 1999): 23.

<sup>49</sup> "Carl D. Lee Writes of E. Belfield Spriggins," *Louisiana Weekly*, November 7, 1925.

special attention to upcoming concerts and events), Spriggins gave many African American musicians in New Orleans an opportunity to perform, providing location and advertisement often out of his own pocket.<sup>50</sup> Many of his cohorts were professional musicians and artists, but because of the constraints of the Jim Crow South and the difficulty of providing for oneself economically just through artistic endeavors, without Spriggins, their talents would have gone unnoticed.<sup>51</sup>

Spriggins was an active member of New Orleans' African American society and involved in many of the social events (i.e. balls, theatrical premieres, sports, revues) that he highlighted in his column. Lynn Abbott wrote about Spriggins' "love for music which overlapped into every facet of his life and work. He was a longstanding member of the B-Sharp Music Club, founded in 1917... to help provide

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<sup>50</sup> See "In the Realm of Music, Literature, and Art" published in the *Louisiana Weekly* on December 12, 1925:

"After a stimulating, successful season in England and other places on the continent, the Fisk Jubilee Singers are appearing in this country for a short concert season. Their success has been more phenomenal [sic] due perhaps to the fact that there is noticed a decided change of the musical mind, and the recent surge of interest on the part of the general public, as well as critical musicians, in the spirituals and folk songs of the American Negro has given an increased importance to the work of this distinguished group of singers."

See also a *Louisiana Weekly* article from January 30, 1926:

"Several reports from the large Eastern cities tell that Julius Bledsoe, the great baritone, who is to appear in recital in New Orleans on next Tuesday, is making a decided hit for himself in these places. ... A record crowd is expected to turn out to hear Mr. Bledsoe on next Tuesday evening in the Pythian Temple. His program will be varied and interesting. It will be of such a nature as to reach all types of real music lovers... From all indications this will be another one of the excellent programs given under the personal direction of our Society Editor, who is doing all in his power to make this program surpass all previous efforts. If the proper support is given Mr. Spriggins he has plans for some very big things for New Orleans next year. Things that will mean much to the members of our group and to our white neighbors as well, for they, too, are now growing interested in the progress of the Negro in New Orleans and are in several instances lending assistance."

*Louisiana Weekly*, March 6, 1926: "The Osceola 5 will be presented in concert by E. Belfield Spriggins. The Osceola Five will be assisted by some of the outstanding artists among our group. The evening will be a carnival of song from plantation melodies to grand opera."

*Louisiana Weekly*, November 26, 1927: "New Orleans music lovers will be afforded a rare opportunity next week when Mme. Anita Patti Browne, dramatic soprano, will appear in a song recital in Xavier Auditorium. Mme. Browne enjoys the distinction of being one of America's leading dramatic sopranos. The madame has long been a resident of Chicago, a leading music center, and whenever at home she spends much time in study. In Europe, where she had the pleasure of singing in the leading concert halls to the best audiences that Europe affords... E. Belfield Spriggins and Mrs. Cora Vignes Wilson are sponsering [sic] the appearance of Mme. Browne in our city at Xavier."

<sup>51</sup> Al Kennedy, *Chord Changes on the Chalkboard: How Public School Teachers Shaped Jazz and the Music of New Orleans* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 13.

concert opportunities and college scholarships for aspiring classicists from the local African-American community.”<sup>52</sup> In 1926 an article announcing his marriage, perhaps written by Spriggins himself, appeared in pages of the *Louisiana Weekly*: “aside from his regular school work, Mr. Spriggins has been engaged in many other activities. He is responsible for the revival of art and music in New Orleans, the stimulation of tennis and the raising of the plane of society. He is a member of the Bunch Club, Belvedere Club and many other social bodies. The couple will leave Jacksonville, Fla, immediately for New Orleans, where Mr. Spriggins will resume his duties in the high and normal school.”<sup>53</sup>

In addition to writing the “Folly Column,” in 1933 Spriggins was also responsible for the music column, “Excavating Local Jazz.” Historian and curator Lynn Abbott suggested that “word for word, ‘Excavating Jazz’ appears to be more accurate, and less inclined to sentimentality, than the ‘New Orleans’ portion of *Jazzmen* [one of the pioneer works on jazz], and much of what has since been published as jazz history.”<sup>54</sup> Scholar Lawrence Gushee posits that “it is interesting to go back to what seems to have been the first published attempt by an African-American native of New Orleans to plumb the mystery of the origin of jazz. The year was 1933, the author E. Belfield Spriggins, social editor of the *Louisiana Weekly*.”<sup>55</sup> Though Dave Peyton was acting as a jazz critic years earlier than Spriggins, Spriggins’ “Excavating Local Jazz,” the six-part series published in 1933, reveals that he may have been one of the very first historians of early New Orleans jazz.

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<sup>52</sup> Abbott, “Remembering,” 22.

<sup>53</sup> “Miss Annie Mae Hart of this city was wed to Prof. E. B. Spriggins of New Orleans at 6:30 p.m. Miss Hart is a member of one of the leading families of this city. Mr. Spriggins is a teacher in the New Orleans public high school and society editor of *The Louisiana Weekly*.” “Social Editor Weds Florida Society Girl,” *Louisiana Weekly*, September 11, 1926.

<sup>54</sup> Abbott, “Remembering,” 22.

<sup>55</sup> Lawrence Gushee, “The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Jazz,” *Black Music Research Journal* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 2.

### From The Texts: Columns by Spriggins and Peyton

Even a decade after the height of the Great Migration, Chicago still functioned as an exciting and opportunistic city for Southern blacks. In 1929, E. Belfield Spriggins wrote in his column in the *Louisiana Weekly* about the thrill that Chicago provided to visiting New Orleanians:

Gangs of folks wended their weary ways toward Chicago and points north, taking advantage of the several (rail) roads that offered such cheap rates last Sunday. Those who have left and the many who will leave later will soon find out that the cheapest part of their trip will be the railroad fare. Folks in Chicago don't mind charging and paying for what they give and receive in the way of entertainment. A fifty cent dance is a cheap affair as is a similar amount for a seat at a down-town movie show. What's true of Chicago is more or less true of Baton Rouge, La., Jacksonville, Fla., Mobile, Ala., and other small nearby southern cities, not to even mention New York and other places which so many of us are ever desirous of seeing.

It is the sincere wish of the writer that many thousands of our people here would travel more so that they might see for themselves just how cheaply we live in New Orleans. They would soon realize why colored business in New Orleans does not thrive as it does in other sections.<sup>56</sup>

As well as mentioning the highlights of Chicago, Spriggins also realized the impact of tourism dollars on the economy in Chicago, and chided New Orleanians for not pulling their weight in the support of their own black-owned businesses. However, Spriggins was not encouraging his readership to move to these other cities, but to give black New Orleans the economic opportunities of Chicago by investing in the local economy. Though during this time period many Southern African Americans looked towards the North as a land of economic and personal opportunity, it is revealing as to the contrasting situation in New Orleans that Spriggins encouraged members of the New Orleans black community to travel to Chicago as tourists and return to New Orleans with new ways of implementing change in their home city, rather than leaving for good. This challenges notions that emigrating to the North was the only opportunity for black Southerners to earn a fair wage and live a culturally and socially fulfilling life. For Spriggins, at least, New Orleans could act as a local alternative to Northern migration.

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<sup>56</sup> E. Belfield Spriggins, Folly Column, *Louisiana Weekly*, June 22, 1929.

Like Spriggins, Peyton's distinct voice and viewpoint came across clearly from his very first column. In November 21, 1925, "The Musical Bunch" premiered in the *Chicago Defender*. In his first column, he took a stand against the new sounds of jazz. "Many of our musicians in order to earn a livelihood have had to play in the variety field, catering to the demand of the jazz-crazed public, but they should not forget to study—it will pay sooner or later." Jazz, as he wrote about it, was just a hiccup in the supremacy of the western classical tradition. On April 3, 1926, he wrote that jazz's "squeaks, squawks, moans, groans, and flutters are the standout features that make the cabaret orchestra popular. If these things are not in evidence the band does not hit with the crowd." And he continued later in the same article "there are many legitimate first class orchestras in those places that are made up of first class musicians but as a rule most of them are unpopular because of the high class of dance music that the orchestras put out. The crowd seems to go where the 'noise' is and I guess, after all, it is what the crowd says that counts." He followed in a similar vein on May 8, 1926:

Probably no other agency of art has the influence upon the human being that music has. There are different kinds of music, and each kind has its power to control the emotion that is susceptible to its charm. ... Another kind is the ballroom music, that carries with it a spirit to fascinate, to invigorate, to make one happy. And still there is another kind—the crude, barbaric, vulgar, suggestive so-called jazz music—which is degrading, appealing only to the animal emotions of the dancers who are susceptible to its charms.<sup>57</sup>

Peyton was not alone in his inability to consider jazz as an acceptable and "legitimate" form of music; as previously noted, founders of the Harlem Renaissance like Locke and Du Bois also worried about the perceived low-class nature of jazz and its influence not only on those who listened to it, but the influence it had on white America in shaping their views of black Americans.

By contrast, Spriggins' early mentions of jazz frame it within a conservative musical milieu. In February of 1926, the Young Men's '20 Dance was advertised repeatedly in the "Folly Column." The theme was the "Dance of all Nations," and for entertainment they had "excellent bands which furnished

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<sup>57</sup> Dave Peyton, The Musical Bunch, *Chicago Defender*, May 8, 1926.

really high class jazz.”<sup>58</sup> Most write-ups by Spriggins of balls and society gatherings just mentioned the fact that music was played, without identifying the band or genre of music. The fact that this dance had a jazz band shows that not only was the word “jazz” part of the lexicon of the day, but also that the music was distinctive enough to be classified *and* that it had reached the status of “worthwhile entertainment,” at least according to the taste and opinion of Spriggins.

However, Spriggins did not always present jazz and other black vernacular music in a complimentary light. In 1928, Spriggins complained about the frequency and volume of blues singers played on the radio:

Now, it seems to the writer that those of us who are upon Rampart Street must surely be tired of listening to the “Race Artists” sing the blues. All day long we are forced to listen to this type of music. It just seems that we’ll never outrun the blues. It’s too bad, too, that our young people of high school age, just the time when they are highly impressionable, are greeted morning, noon and night with these “haunting melodies.”

One solution to this problem is to urge our folks to keep moving when they hear these songs being rendered. The Rampart Street music stores play these songs just for us. Let them stay on their hands a while or let them wait until you come in and then play them.<sup>59</sup>

As this grumbling shows, Spriggins thought that buying the music was one thing, but having record stores play the music loudly enough to be disruptive was another thing altogether. While Spriggins did complain about the blues, his detailed write-ups and critiques of classical concerts drew attention to the myriad performances by visiting and local talent, and this demonstrates the importance on which he placed the performance of classical music and spirituals by African American musicians.

While Spriggins encouraged his readership to attend concerts, he also chastised them when he felt that the crowd was too thin, the applause too weak, or the monetary donations too spare:

Speaking of lack of interest, we are reminded that New Orleans, once so popular as a musical center, seems to have gone to sleep. It might have been that

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<sup>58</sup> E. Belfield Spriggins, Folly Column, *Louisiana Weekly*, February 13, 1926.

<sup>59</sup> E. Belfield Spriggins, Folly Column, *Louisiana Weekly*, October 20, 1928.

though Mr. Diton's recital at Xavier, though announced long ago, was not followed up with much advertising, or it might have been because of the Lenten season; however it was, while the audience was an enthusiastic one, it was rather disappointing. Mr. Diton, though you may not judge it from his newspaper articles, is one of America's leading composers, organists, pianists and musical scholars; president of the National Association of Negro Musicians, of which the B Sharp Music Club is the local branch.

Is it too much jazz or is it just pure lack of interest? Fathers, mothers, music teachers and other interested persons should encourage music pupils to avail themselves of the opportunities to hear concert artists of repute.<sup>60</sup>

By mentioning "too much jazz," Spriggins showed that he was aware of the popularity of jazz music, and is even admitting that popular tastes are sated more readily in the dance halls than the concert halls. He also chastised his readers for not attending by calling out parents and music teachers alike for not requiring their children/students to attend the concert, or as he put it, to enjoy "concert artists of repute."

As was mentioned previously, for many African Americans, spirituals held a celebrated position in the realm of African American music. Like the originators of the Harlem Renaissance, E. Belfield Spriggins and Osceola A. Blanchet (a fellow teacher and colleague of Spriggins' who wrote articles for the *Weekly* in 1928), paid close attention to local performances of spirituals. In their reviews of the musicians, singers, and choirs, Spriggins and Blanchet often mentioned the positive reception of the audiences the artists sang/played spirituals. Though the concert hall might be quiet during Verdi and Bach, the audience would perk up for songs like "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "Wading in the Water," and "Go Down, Moses." For example, in a review of a performance by Lucretia Lawson Mitchell, renowned mezzo soprano, Spriggins discussed in full detail her gown, the lack of audience members due to torrential rain, and her uncomfortable performance during the first half of the program because of the chill and dampness in the theatre. Spriggins then warmed in his description of Mitchell as he

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<sup>60</sup> E. Belfield Spriggins, Folly Column, *Louisiana Weekly*, March 10, 1928.

described her singing of spirituals. “The last group, composed of songs and spirituals by Negro composers, found the artist in better spirits again and she seemed to have forgotten the annoyances, the audience, everything, except that she was singing the thoughts of our ancestors.”<sup>61</sup>

Although Spriggins continued to tout classical music over jazz, Peyton’s attitude began to change as time went on. By 1928 he seemed to have grudgingly embraced jazz, at least acknowledging its positive economic effects on African American musicians. On June 30, 1928, Peyton wrote, “the jazz craze has been a wonderful innovation for the jazz musician, and at this time we cannot tell just how long it is going to last, so the jazz kings should make hay while the sun shines and save their money, and at the same time use their leisure time in studying real music. The tide may turn when we least expect. Better be ready.”

This change by Peyton reflected a broader acceptance towards jazz as it became more economically viable. As Williams suggested, even the influential members of the Harlem Renaissance “recognised that jazz was hot, and they knew it was a black creation with potential. In its raw, bluesy form, with those coarse tones, loose morals and vibrant rhythms, jazz didn’t seem compatible with the ‘New Negro’ image of a dignified, sophisticated artist, proud of black ancestry and accepted by white America. But this was not an entirely negative view—jazz simply needed polish and a smart suit to make it an accepted part of the movement.”<sup>62</sup> Basically, jazz needed an image change to become more acceptable to the African American intelligentsia.

As in Chicago, jazz was not universally accepted by New Orleans society in its early days. On June 20, 1918, jazz was lambasted in an editorial in the *Times-Picayune*. The columnist wrote that, “In the matter of the jass [sic], New Orleans is particularly interested, since it has been widely suggested that this particular form of musical vice had its birth in this city....It behooves us to be last to accept the

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<sup>61</sup> E. Belfield Spriggins, Folly Column, *Louisiana Weekly*, March 13, 1926.

<sup>62</sup> Williams, “Jazz and the New Negro,” 16.



atrocities in polite society, and where it has crept in we should make it a point of civic honor to suppress it.”<sup>63</sup> In 1926, an editorial on the religion page of the *Louisiana Weekly* proclaimed that “[Jazz] has its grasp upon the public so strong that it’s a question of time when this menace will have to be checked by the law. [It] is breaking up more homes than the joy-riding automobiles.”<sup>64</sup> In 1928, another article in the *Louisiana Weekly* dismissed jazz as a raucous fad that could not be compared with classical music.<sup>65</sup>

Even as late as 1929, Spriggins still held out against jazz, and wrote contemptuously in his column about The Tinpan Kings, a jazz band that was gaining notoriety along the East Coast. The Kings had been wined and dined in Philadelphia, given new suits and shoes, and played music for an exclusively white audience on their way to New York City. “The Tinpan Kings had something different, and it appealed to thousands in search of entertainment. They have sold their wares and white men are the buyers. You and I have condemned these men as a ‘disgrace to the race’; the white man has capitalized this ‘disgrace’ and can offer them better salaries than our poor, tired, intelligent teachers, preachers, business men and others get for all their years of training, expertise, culture, etc.”<sup>66</sup> In this instance, the angry response leveled at The Tinpan Kings seemed to concern the ways in which they performed and travelled, and the fact that they played for segregated audiences, and not necessarily because the type of music they were playing was jazz. While certainly Spriggins’ overarching argument concerns the economics surrounding jazz, his underlying anger stems from the rigid inequality of the Jim Crow system, which prevented many educated, hardworking African Americans from achieving the same level of professional and economic comfort as that of similarly educated and skilled white Americans.

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<sup>63</sup> “Jass and Jassism,” *Times-Picayune*, June 20, 1918.

<sup>64</sup> “The Jazz and the Public Dance,” *Louisiana Weekly*, March 6, 1926.

<sup>65</sup> “Just as ‘jazz’ is not solely for the musical rabble, so is the ‘classic’ not solely for the musical intelligentsia, yet the very word ‘classic’ seems to create a feeling of disgust and strikes terror to the heart of many a listener...the only real difference of the ‘classics’ and the ‘jazz’ is in the permanence of one and the immediate oblivion of the other.” Osceola Blanchet, “Appreciation of Classical Music,” *Louisiana Weekly*, March 24, 1928.

<sup>66</sup> E. Belfield Spriggins, Folly Column, *Louisiana Weekly*, January 19, 1929.

Whereas Spriggins derided the Tinpan Kings for “selling out” to a white audience, Dave Peyton highlighted and applauded a band that had gained popularity with white audiences. On January 8, 1927, he noted, “Alex Jackson and his crack New York orchestra is famous among the whites of eastern America. In New York City this bunch has played for the cream of highbrows. They play music like the crack white bands, they are favorites over the radio. Cincinnati is crazy about Alex Jackson’s bunch and the race should feel proud of them, as they are making history for us in a community that needs reversing of thought about us all.” Unlike Spriggins, who disapproved of the Tinpan Kings’ decision to play for segregated audiences, Peyton once again seemed to uphold the viewpoint that a steady income and positive recognition from the public, even a whites-only public, was better than empty pockets and negative press about African Americans by whites.

In 1960, Chadwick Hansen wrote, “One should not expect the music criticism of a Negro newspaper in the twenties to be consistent with its political and social criticism. The Negro who disliked the social assumptions of the white middle class still had good reason to dislike traditional jazz, since traditional jazz was part of the white stereotype of the Negro.”<sup>67</sup> Hansen was writing specifically about Dave Peyton and the *Chicago Defender*. In this instance, one sees the *Defender* being used as a historical source regarding the view of jazz by African Americans as early as 1960. Hansen captured the ambivalence in Peyton’s tone and the struggle he faced between the lure of money in the pocket and the notions of middle-class respectability and racial uplift.

### **Jazz and Ownership: An African American Art Form?**

On multiple occasions Peyton discussed “ownership” of jazz music. In his view, jazz rhythms and styles were “pirated” by whites, who also took credit for the innovations in musical playing:

What we are up against is the fact that our music, our rhythm, our humor, has been pirated by the other races, and they are doing our stuff which was ours

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<sup>67</sup> Hansen, “Social Influences on Jazz Style,” 500.

exclusively once. Then the critics say we are imitating the Nordics when we are only doing our own stuff. If any of us create anything new and novel, give it ample protection and hold it. If the other fellow hasn't got the ability and creative powers of invention, do not show him your stuff.<sup>68</sup>

In these instances, Peyton voiced his concern that jazz and other creative forms of expression originating in the African American community were not improved by collaboration because white audiences and artists appropriated elements from the black creators without giving due financial and creative credit to the originators.

The assertion by musicologists Susan McClary and Robert Walser that "the familiar pattern of African Americans developing an expressive form but having it register as significant for others only when it is picked up by 'genuine' artists with aesthetic know-how"<sup>69</sup> applies to Peyton's dissatisfaction with the apparent lack of equality in creative partnership between blacks and whites. Writing on African American dance in the late twentieth century, McClary and Walser note that these new forms of expression are often not legitimized until they are theorized and written about by white scholars. Their complaint applies to jazz and to Spriggins' and Peyton's disgruntlement with members of the white entertainment community who usurped innovative techniques and creative elements of jazz music without acknowledging the original role of the black community.

In 1929, the *Weekly* provided information about a concert given by Isadora Newman (daughter of famed Jewish New Orleanian philanthropist, Isadore Newman), who considered the art and music of African Americans to be her own personal muse:

Strikingly strange as it may seem, there is always someone to rise up and seek to show the finer and better side of Negro character and life. ...Mme. Isadora Newman, another New Orleans product, a writer and artist of national repute, who of her own initiative and liking, has selected to portray the Negro, because he is "real and primitive," as she puts it. (She) has assayed to champion the cause of the Negro by using her talent, money and time in bringing out all that's

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<sup>68</sup> Dave Peyton, The Musical Bunch, *Chicago Defender*, March 24, 1928.

<sup>69</sup> McClary and Walser, "Theorizing the Body," 78.

best, lovable and true. While possessing but little formal academic education she has sprung into recognition as one of the best modern portrayers of Negro life, both with the brush and pen. She has sung Negro spirituals and songs all over Europe.<sup>70</sup>

“While possessing but little formal academic education” might be a tongue-in-cheek reference to her amateurish artistic pursuits and a thinly-veiled criticism of Newman, the inclusion of this review of Newman by the *Weekly* shows that positive representations of African American culture, even by a white woman, were seen to be better than silence or derision (though Newman’s singing of spirituals and categorization of black culture as “primitive” demonstrates her underlying inability to recognize black culture as anything other than a folk art form).

Just as Peyton expressed his frustration and displeasure that “our music, our rhythm, our humor, has been pirated by the other races, and they are doing our stuff which was ours exclusively once,” in 1928 Spriggins noted an analogous experience of his own of the African American tradition of jazz being arrogated by white New Orleanians:

Taking a trip to the river Wednesday evening and watching the churning of the muddy Mississippi waters, my attention was suddenly attracted by sweet strains of jazz music that were wafted upon the evening breeze. Looking a little distance, I saw the Greater New Orleans, a pleasure boat for white Americans, anchored there, awaiting the crowds of pleasure seekers to board her for the nightly ‘sight-seeing’ trip. The music came from this boat. It was furnished by, no, not black Americans, but white ones. Immediately the question arose in my mind, ‘What has become of our boys, namely, Sidney’s Southern Syncopators, who formerly furnished the music on this palatial boat?’ Such is life. We are being displaced for various reasons.<sup>71</sup>

Though Spriggins did not delve into the reasons behind the dismissal of a black jazz band in favor of a white one, he showed an awareness that black musicians were losing economic ownership of jazz or control over the performance of their musical traditions in the segregated Jim Crow-era South. Here

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<sup>70</sup> “Exhibit and Recital Opened to Colored,” *Louisiana Weekly*, April 20, 1929.

<sup>71</sup> E. Belfield Spriggins, Folly Column, *Louisiana Weekly*, July 14, 1928.

Spriggins' view of jazz music has shifted from criticism to ownership, his critique emphasizing the context in which the music is presented, rather than the music itself.

In the *Chicago Defender* on May 8, 1926, Dave Peyton wrote that “probably no other agency of art has the influence upon the human being that music has. There are different kinds of music, and each kind has its power to control the emotion that is susceptible to its charm. ... Another kind is the ballroom music, that carries with it a spirit to fascinate, to invigorate, to make one happy. And still there is another kind—the crude, barbaric, vulgar, suggestive so-called jazz music—which is degrading, appealing only to the animal emotions of the dancers who are susceptible to its charms.”

In 1926, Peyton's description of jazz as “suggestive,” “crude,” and “barbaric” stemmed from the idea—drawn from a complex racist colonial history—that African American music and dances were all rooted in the physical, sexualized body, while Western music and dances were crafted from the educated and moralistic mind. According to McClary and Walser, “The first step away from this trap of polarities is to recognize that black music is not the universal unconscious or the primitive body... but rather a highly disciplined set of practices.”<sup>72</sup> Peyton may not have criticized jazz and jazz-style dancing so harshly if the prevalent Eurocentric “high culture” community had not labeled the artistic expressions of African Americans as barbaric, dirty, and of the body.

Peyton's view of jazz was common in his time period. In many ways, he was reflecting the prevalent opinion shared by those who discredited as well as those who lauded jazz. Jazz critic Robert Goffin published on jazz as early as 1931, though his analysis of the music and the musicians themselves focused more on the persistent stereotype of the “primitivism” of the music and less on the artists' creative ability and musical virtuosity. From his book published in 1944, Goffin wrote “the two musical poles of African rhythm and [European] folk song fought against each other for control of the interior life of the Negro. By some strange process of osmosis, mutual influence, and fusion, the two

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<sup>72</sup> McClary and Walser, “Theorizing the Body,” 76.

gave birth to jazz many decades later.”<sup>73</sup> Goffin denied African Americans creative agency as well as intellectual ability. As characterized by historian Ted Gioia, this stereotype espoused by Goffin “views jazz as a music charged with emotion, but largely devoid of intellectual content, and which sees the jazz musician as the inarticulate and unsophisticated practitioner of an art which he himself scarcely understands.”<sup>74</sup> This primitivist stereotype has persisted in jazz historiography throughout the twentieth century.

In a column from July 16, 1927, Peyton once again reminded his readers that jazz was not a legitimate expression of black musical talent. He implored musicians not to forget the technique and fingering needed for classical compositions. He worried that all the jazz playing would “ruin” the musicians and their ability to get work as non-jazz artists. “This music, jazz, appeals to many emotions of the human being. Some it thrills, to some it makes toil easier, and to the young dance folks it offers an entry to the road that leads to shame and destruction... The dangerous jazz is the barbaric, filthy discordant, wild and shrieky music, that should be eliminated from the public dance halls and should be disqualified by the decent element. This writer has several orchestras and it is only upon request from patrons that this sort of music is rendered and then it is short and sweet.” In Peyton’s opinion, jazz was a music that invited the “decent element” to deviance, though it is obvious in his commentary that the public, with special emphasis placed on the “young dance folks,” supported and enjoyed jazz and the lifestyle associated with the music. His very condemnation of the music and the obvious pervasiveness of it in Chicago society demonstrated its impact on the culture and entertainment of black Chicagoans, and again reinforces the mythos that black dancing was inferior to traditional European-style dancing.

Such descriptions of jazz as “the barbaric, filthy discordant, wild and shrieky music, that should be eliminated from the public dance halls” reinforce the erroneous “primitivism” of jazz. According to

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<sup>73</sup> Robert Goffin, *Jazz: From the Congo to the Metropolitan* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, & Co., 1944), 16.

<sup>74</sup> Ted Gioia, “Jazz and the Primitivist Myth,” *The Musical Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (1989): 137-8.

McClary and Walser, "The fanaticism and hysteria that have greeted each new African-American dance in the last hundred years attest to the centrality of this music in contestations over the body. And the dances invariably triumphed over whatever opposition they faced, even if they were toned down somewhat in the transition. It is this music, these dances--not the hot-house experiments of the avant-garde--that have shaped us, body and soul, throughout this century."<sup>75</sup>

Two poems in particular published in the *Louisiana Weekly* showed the fear that jazz, in all its musical strains, would cause African American culture to backslide to a time of inequality, subjugation, and chaos. Published in 1927, this stanza from "Jazz Leads Us to Chaos" by Drusilla Dunjee Houston demonstrates the mood of the time:

Listen to the wild discord,  
Like chaos from which the Lord  
In creation formed the world.  
Jazz today mankind hurls  
Back to chaos and strife.  
The Beast in man finds life.  
There is no use denying  
Purity is dying.<sup>76</sup>

If jazz—a product of the artistic and creative abilities of African American culture—stood for disruption, filth, and literal and figurative darkness, as argued here, then what form of cultural expression existed as the paradigm of high culture? With these types of poems, articles, and appeals going out weekly to African Americans throughout the United States, decrying the sins of jazz, the reading public must have felt torn between eschewing and embracing popular culture and entertainment.

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<sup>75</sup> McClary and Walser, "Theorizing the Body," 79.

<sup>76</sup> See poems in appendix, page 48.

## Jazz and Dance

Both Spriggins and Peyton wrote of one venue where jazz played an appropriate role: at the public dance. Though jazz music and jazz dancing did not (and has not, one could claim) ever fully divorce itself from accusations of immorality and overt sexuality, jazz's claim on the dance floor is what helped open the door to wider acceptance of jazz music by black and white society. Jazz was able to gain a foothold at social functions through the ability of the musicians to adapt their style of jazz music to the popular dance tunes of the day. According to jazz historian Bruce Raeburn, jazz was more readily accepted by members of high society once it embraced popular songs and melded into a new type of music fit for dancing.<sup>77</sup> Historian Thomas Fiehrer suggested that "Until the advent of mass media and air-conditioning during the 1950s, public halls were the essential venue of recreational dancing, romancing and band performance. Some establishments catered to whites, some to coloured, some to blacks and still others to whomever paid admission."<sup>78</sup>

While not specifically mentioning jazz, numerous articles in the *Louisiana Weekly* in the late 1920s discussed fashionable dance crazes, paying particular attention to the Charleston. According to an article in the *Louisiana Weekly* from January of 1926, the Pelican Dance Hall's grand opening had music that was provided by Ridgley's Original Tuxedo Orchestra, a popular jazz group. In February of the same year, the society page highlighted a dance hosted by the Fortnightly Club, where young and old attendees attempted the latest dance craze, the Charleston, and as Spriggins described it, "this old-fashioned, typically Negro dance" made quite an impression.<sup>79</sup> The Charleston comes up at least twice

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<sup>77</sup> "Trombonist William 'Baba' Ridgley of the Original Tuxedo Jazz Orchestra remembered how his income increased from \$1.50 per night in Storyville to \$25 per night for a debutante ball, another indication of how social acceptance of jazz as a dance music helped it to rise above earlier connotations of vice and poverty." Bruce Boyd Raeburn, "Dancing Hot and Sweet: New Orleans Jazz in the 1920s," *The Jazz Archivist* (December 1992): 12.

<sup>78</sup> Thomas Fiehrer, "From Quadrille to Stomp: The Creole Origins of Jazz," *Popular Music* 10, no. 1 (Jan. 1991):25.

<sup>79</sup> E. Belfield Spriggins, Folly Column, *Louisiana Weekly*, February 6, 1926.



more in 1926. The February 20, 1926, edition of the *Louisiana Weekly* mentioned a dance hosted by the Illinois Club,<sup>80</sup> where attendees of the party danced the Charleston and “really cut loose.” And a month later, Spriggins advertised a contest sponsored by the *Louisiana Weekly* and the Lyric Theater to find the best Charleston dancers in New Orleans.<sup>81</sup>

Spriggins made sure to clarify the difference between low-class jazz and music that the society folk of New Orleans could dance to: “Folks are surely looking forward to...their big boat ride on the palatial steamer *America*. With an orchestra like Celestin’s Original Tuxedo furnishing the music for dancing, there is no small wonder that the demand for the tickets is so great. This promises to be a rare treat and one of the openers of the season.”<sup>82</sup> The “season” referred to the social season in New Orleans which typically started in the fall and reached its height during Carnival. In this particular event, Spriggins seems to approve of the jazz music and dancing because black New Orleanians wealthy enough to buy tickets for a steamboat excursion would be the ones participating. Money and class appear to be more of a factor in this acceptance by Spriggins than the music itself. Once again, he demonstrated that *how* the music was performed and for *whom* was more important than whether it was of the black vernacular or the white European art tradition.

While Spriggins did not often discuss specific musicians and bands, he was invested in the social and economic welfare of the African American community in New Orleans. For numerous weeks in 1926

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<sup>80</sup> The Illinois Club was founded in 1895 by Chicagoan Wiley Knight as New Orleans’ first African American Mardi Gras club. In 1926 the club split in two, creating the Original Illinois and the Young Men Illinois Clubs. Maria Montoya, “Original Illinois Club Returns to Roots,” *Times-Picayune*, February 2, 2008. [http://blog.nola.com/mariamontoya/2008/02/original\\_illinois\\_club\\_returns.html](http://blog.nola.com/mariamontoya/2008/02/original_illinois_club_returns.html). Accessed May 6, 2012.

<sup>81</sup> “The *Louisiana Weekly*, in co-operation with the management of the Lyric Theater, wants to find the two best Charleston dancers in New Orleans. Did you know that white men and women run over each other for the privilege of seeing Negro performers ‘strut their stuff’? The *Louisiana Weekly* is your mouthpiece and your champion. A few weeks ago the editors decided that the popular show house should extend the same consideration the regular patrons that it does to visitors. The colored people of New Orleans want to see just what is put on at the midnight shows that makes the white patrons rave with compliments as to the ability of Negro actors and actresses to put on a more entertaining show than any of the jim crow theaters furnish to gallery gods and lower floor occupants.” *Louisiana Weekly*, March 20, 1926.

<sup>82</sup> E. Belfield Spriggins, Folly Column, *Louisiana Weekly*, September 29, 1928.

he exhorted his readership to support the Parisian Roof Garden, a music venue that struggled to stay open. On December 4, 1926, Spriggins wrote that, “While the band is an excellent one, unless it has open competition, it ‘rats on the job at times’ and fails to render that type of syncopation that is now popular. Staying away will not remedy the conditions. The manager must and will take suggestions, and if the patrons want ‘soft jazz with lots of pep,’ they’ll have that, too.” Spriggins recognized the cultural importance of jazz music on the paying public and understood that clubs would fail economically and lose popularity if they didn’t provide the people with the music of the hour: jazz.

Throughout the four-year time period studied in this paper, on an almost weekly basis Spriggins drew attention to a night club or musical venue that was either providing “tip-top” entertainment, or conversely, “falling down on the job.” Using his position of power and influence, he played an active role in whether or not a club or theatre would thrive in New Orleans. In 1928, in his review of Armond Piron’s Garden of Joy, Spriggins noted that “Lots of younger folks have been asking about the music end at this famous pleasure palace. From the hearty applause which greeted the improved music furnished by Newman’s Famous New Orleans Orchestra, it seems that the majority of the crowd was well pleased. With the addition of Lewis Cottrell, saxophonist, the aggregation was really pleasing. The music was snappy, regular and joyously given.”<sup>83</sup> Quite out of the ordinary is his mention of a musician by name, but this showed the time he spent in getting to know musicians in the city as well as his knowledge of music and interest in the popular music scene. Similarly, regarding the opening of the Astoria Gardens, a club catering to African Americans, Spriggins spent particular attention on the musicians and the caliber of the crowd:

Prof. Jones and his artistic musicians rendered a program of the latest jazz numbers that kept feet and shoulders moving even when the entertainers were showing their wares. The entertainers, too, added much to the occasion. The evening clothes worn by them were fashionable and entirely new. Their feature numbers showed that each entertainer had in mind what

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<sup>83</sup> E. Belfield Spriggins, Folly Column, *Louisiana Weekly*, January 21, 1928.

would be pleasing to the finer sensibilities of all of the guests. What is true of the women is also true of the men.

Many of the city's leading professional and business men and women were among the first nighters. Expressions of congratulation and wishes for unprecedented success were showered upon Messrs. Braden and Fauvia by the big, happy crowd that was made up of a representative crowd of folks from all walks of life.<sup>84</sup>

Even though he mentions that the club hosted people from "all walks of life," Spriggins made sure to note that at this particular event, "many of the city's leading professional and business men and women were among the first nighters." The music was good, and played to please the crowd. So musicians play what the "best of the city" wants to hear, and the best of the city are ranked as such because of their status in the African American social and business population. Overall, as long as the performance hall or night club was upscale, genteel, clean, with a friendly staff and good orchestra, Spriggins approved.<sup>85</sup>

### **Peyton's Version of Jazz History**

On multiple occasions during his tenure as author of "The Musical Bunch," Dave Peyton attempted to chronicle the history of jazz music. The subtitle of his column on December 12, 1925, was "The Origin of Jazz" but he did not mention New Orleans at all. He speculated that ragtime was the precursor to jazz, and noted that Scott Joplin deserved credit for his musical accomplishments. In fact, Peyton decided that a Chicago musician was the first to play jazz:

This may or may not be true, but to my knowledge Wilbur Sweatman, the clarinetist, was the first one to do this kind of playing. In 1906 Mr. Sweatman played in a little picture house on S. State St., in Chicago, called 'The Little Grand Theater.' Mr. Sweatman led the band with the clarinet and was a sensation. White players would come to this little house from all over the country to hear Sweatman moan on his clarinet, and many of them would engage him to teach

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<sup>84</sup> E. Belfield Spriggins, Folly Column, *Louisiana Weekly*, August 24, 1929.

<sup>85</sup> "Some folks have been asking what ye scribe thinks of the night club. Well, I tell you, friends, he thinks it's a dandy idea and is deserving of your co-operation and support for the management is endeavoring to give New Orleans something clean and up-to-date. Not the slightest objectionable feature is tolerated by them. On the opening night one of the waiters was called down rather severely... for his infraction of a house that has been established to protect the patrons who wish to attend a place that is kept "right." E. Belfield Spriggins, Folly Column, *Louisiana Weekly*, August 24, 1929.

them how to do it. Little did we think that Mr. Sweatman's original style of playing would be adopted by the great jazz artists of today; but it is and Mr. Sweatman can claim the honor of being the first to establish it.<sup>86</sup>

Six months later, in an article published on May 29, 1926, he hypothesized that in the nineteenth century African Americans didn't know how to read music or know any theory but eventually they learned and some of the first organized orchestras were in—where else?—Chicago. In 1927, he again returned to the Sweatman thread:

The first man to my knowledge, [to play jazz] and I think I am correct, was Wilbur Sweatman, the well known clarinetist. He went to New York in 1906 and secured an engagement. He was such a hit with his queer style of playing...that Broadway went wild about him. It was in Chicago, Ill that Sweatman and his little three-piece orchestra gained fame in the early part of 1906. People of both races came to hear the three-piece orchestra play jazz music, although they didn't call it jazz then. They called it 'hot music.'<sup>87</sup>

Peyton used his knowledge about musicians in Chicago and made a blanket statement about African American musicians in general, that their theoretical knowledge of music lagged behind that of white musicians. But Peyton may not have known about the long history of trained professional musicians in New Orleans who read music and played in orchestras throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>88</sup> Though he was commenting on an experience shared by many blacks, his statement reinforces the argument that African Americans in the United States were not a monolithic entity. The experience of early musicians in New Orleans varied considerably from that of musicians in the rest of the country.

When in 1928 Peyton once again wrote about the origins of jazz, he decided that New Orleans could claim the early roots in an almost verbatim repetition<sup>89</sup> of the same phrase he always used about

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<sup>86</sup> Dave Peyton, The Musical Bunch, *Chicago Defender*, December 12, 1925.

<sup>87</sup> Dave Peyton, The Musical Bunch, *Chicago Defender*, February 5, 1927.

<sup>88</sup> See for instance Lester Sullivan's "Composers of Color of Nineteenth-Century New Orleans: The History Behind the Music," *Black Music Research Journal* 8, no. 1 (1988), 51–82.

<sup>89</sup> "Down on the levees and plantations of the sunny South was the real beginning of jazz. A group of singers and players would get together after sundown, when the day's toil was over, and harmonize." Dave Peyton, The Musical Bunch, *Chicago Defender*, February 27, 1926.

this topic: "Down on the levees of the Sunny South was the real beginning of jazz music. New Orleans can rightfully claim the birth of jazz."<sup>90</sup> While this might be the only time he gave credit to New Orleans as the "birthplace" of jazz, in 1927 he compared Creole musicians to their northern "brothers" and noted the stylistic differences that came with the two groups:

The original Creole jazz band found their way to Chicago in the year of 1911. They opened an engagement at the Grand theatre and were a distinct hit on the all-star vaudeville bill. How well do I remember that opening night, and at that time I predicted that the Creole style of playing music would soon grip the Middle-West. This original combination worked their way to New York over the largest circuits in the country. They spread their weird, scintillating music all over Broadway. .... These newcomers made their hit and at the same time brought on jealousy of the northern brother musicians. ...The advent of the Creole musicians in our midst was somewhat of an innovation. Time went on and they made a huge success of music. Their Creole brothers down home, learning of this success, decided to come to the land of the free and plenty money.<sup>91</sup>

According to Kenney, Peyton's memory of the Original Creole Jazz Band touring in Chicago served him correctly.<sup>92</sup> The Creole Jazz Band did travel around America from New Orleans and left a lasting impression on the eyes and ears of Chicago's musicians and music-listening public.<sup>93</sup>

While Peyton may have waffled over the years about the geographical origins of jazz, he never questioned the role that African Americans had in the creation of it. "I want to impress upon the reader's mind that to our own group belongs the credit for the birth of jazz, and we can justly claim it: it is indisputable. How many times have I seen white musicians coming around where the Race orchestras were playing, trying to catch on, learn something, get the tricks...There are bound to be new creations

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<sup>90</sup> Dave Peyton, The Musical Bunch, *Chicago Defender*, March 10, 1928.

<sup>91</sup> Dave Peyton, The Musical Bunch, *Chicago Defender*, November 19, 1927.

<sup>92</sup> "The Original Creole Orchestra, usually cited as a major influence in the transition from instrumental ragtime to jazzband music, toured the nation on several vaudeville circuits for many years before two of its most influential musicians...settled in Chicago in 1918." Kenney, *Chicago Jazz*, 12.

<sup>93</sup> See Lawrence Gushee and Harry Carr's "How the Creole Band Came to Be," *Black Music Research Journal* 8, no. 1 (1988): 83-100.

from our group in music, because we are naturally musical.”<sup>94</sup> While in previous columns Peyton attempted to divorce black influence from the “wild” and “barbaric” physicality of jazz, here he clearly accepted the jazz tradition as uniquely African American and claimed complete credit for the music on behalf of all black Americans and their “natural” musical talent.

Though jazz was discussed sooner and more frankly in Chicago’s main African American newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, than in New Orleans’ *Louisiana Weekly*, jazz was not viewed completely positively in the *Defender*. Peyton encouraged musicians to seek out jazz engagements for economic opportunities, though by 1929 his tone towards jazz shifted from forced toleration to grudging acceptance. Surprisingly, New Orleans did not play a central role in Peyton’s discussion of jazz in local or national scenes until 1929.<sup>95</sup> Though he frequently mentioned Louis Armstrong and other New Orleans-born musicians, he credited their success to the city of Chicago and not to the city of their birth: “Chicago’s own Louis Armstrong and his orchestra are the current rage in New York. They have taken the city by storm. They have things their own way and to this writer they are playing better than ever before.”<sup>96</sup>

## Conclusion

While much has been written about the reception and rejection of early jazz within the white community, little has been written about the place of jazz within the African American community. The views expressed in these two newspapers, the *Louisiana Weekly* and the *Chicago Defender*, shaped and reflected not only the views of their readerships but also the opinions of the two columnists studied, E.

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<sup>94</sup> Dave Peyton, The Musical Bunch, *Chicago Defender*, February 5, 1927.

<sup>95</sup> “The South can be boastful of the fact that the best musicians come from her domain. New Orleans has produced many of the standout musician players of today and more especially in the field of modern syncopation. Many of the noted musicians are Creoles. They have migrated north and in other directions of the country, where their originality and style of playing has won them much distinction. The New Orleans musicians are noted for their peculiarity in playing. Each of them has a different style on his respective instrument that attracts attention. In the present day jazz field the New Orleans musicians stand in the spotlight of popularity and are invaluable to the present day dance orchestra.” Dave Peyton, The Musical Bunch, *Chicago Defender*, June 15, 1929.

<sup>96</sup> Dave Peyton, The Musical Bunch, *Chicago Defender*, August 10, 1929.

Belfield Spriggins and Dave Peyton. The struggle between embracing and rejecting black vernacular music shines through in their columns.

The process of rejection, ambivalence, and acceptance of jazz music and the jazz lifestyle shows the evolution in the acknowledgment and recognition of the place of jazz within the African American community. This process is shown not just through Spriggins' and Peyton's reviews of the performances of the musicians and their audiences, but through their comprehension of the economic viability and power that jazz had in uplifting and enriching the community. For instance, we see the evolution of Peyton's opinion over a four-year period in just a few short adjectives. In 1926, he described jazz as "crude," "barbaric," and "vulgar;" while in 1929 he pronounced jazz musicians as "stand(ing) in the spotlight of popularity" and being "invaluable." Similarly, by the end of the decade, E. Belfield Spriggins mentioned jazz bands more frequently than he did in 1926, though in his columns he was always careful to describe the jazz groups as "orchestras" that played "high-class" music. While his explicit references to jazz music or elements of the jazz lifestyle were less frequent than those mentioned by Peyton, the context of the performance—who, what, where—was almost always noted. According to Spriggins, nightclubs that catered to the jazz-crazed public had to be "clean and up-to-date" in order to "protect the patrons who wish to attend a place that is kept 'right.'" If the location of the performance and those in attendance met Spriggins' specific definition of educated middle-class respectability, then the presence of jazz mattered little.

Without close examination of these two newspapers, the common thread of acceptance or rejection of jazz by *white audiences* might continue to be the prevailing theme in current jazz historiography. Using these newspapers as a lens into the history of jazz within the African American community argues for the role of newspapers in historical inquiry. Both journalists represented a specific element of African American society in their respective cities and their frequent vacillations between acknowledgment of the significance of jazz in the community and pointed criticism of the

music show the labored process involved in supporting a controversial cultural culmination of African American creativity.



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## Appendix

Drusilla Dunjee Houston, The Poet's Corner, *Louisiana Weekly*, August 27, 1927:

### "Jazz Leads Us to Chaos"

Yes, we hear it and applaud  
Because we are devoid  
Of wisdom. Those jarring strains,  
But the loosening of chains  
The ages have linked, that we  
Might climb from savagry [sic].  
We see in its surging pack  
A great race GOING BACK.

Listen to the wild discord,  
Like chaos from which the Lord  
In creation formed the world.  
Jazz today mankind hurls  
Back to chaos and strife.  
The Beast in man finds life.  
There is no use denying  
Purity is dying.

Jazz the pent up energy  
Of a great race. Which free  
And rightly channeled might lend  
The nation strength. Crushed,  
    Penned,  
It finds today lowered vent  
In lust. The Tryan's bent  
Is downward. To bar our way  
They turned their backs on DAY.

Edw. Dejoie Burbridge, *Louisiana Weekly*, March 3, 1928:

"Pagan Music"

Where is this Africa they speak of?  
I sense it about me here.  
In barbaric music called Jazz,  
Just pagan music, sans care.

Back once more in the jungle,  
A brassy sun; a leaden sky;  
Hearing the dull throb of ton-tome  
Beaten by black men passing by.

One need not go back to Africa,  
Savagery awaits by your side;  
The nearest cabaret is a jungle,  
Where thrills of Liberia abide.

Here tattooed women dance wildly,  
Their sensuous bodies steeped in sin,  
And much-displayed limbs are exhibited  
To glassy-eyed men soaked in gin.

Where is this Africa they speak of?  
I sense it about me here.  
In a people with wild abandon,  
Dancing pagan music, "sans" care.

## **Vita**

The author was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. She received her Bachelor's degree in History and Bachelor's degree in English with a creative writing concentration from Louisiana State University in 2006. In 2011 she joined the University of New Orleans' Master's program in History with a public history concentration, and studied under the guidance of Professor Connie Atkinson.